

# Masters of Illusion

*American Leadership in the Media Age*

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## Preface

The ideological conflicts of the twentieth century have faded. In this book, we find no need to deconstruct competing ideologies. Instead, certain habitual attitudes of our nation – embedded in our public culture (hodgepodge of political beliefs and nonpolitical wishful thinking) – now exercise an influence more powerful than the strongest of the ideologies of the past. The public culture is stronger because there is less opposition to it than there would be to a monolithic ideology because wishful thinking is continually reinforced by all elements of society – political, intellectual, and media. Its hold on our minds is stronger than ever was the hold of an ideology on our hearts. Hence, there is a compelling need to compare public culture to reality, and to point to the dangers of the illusions inherent in our public culture.

America will be confronted with a cascading sequence of military-diplomatic threats in the next four decades. Some are glimpsed by our leaders, but none are adequately understood because our leaders' perceptions are impaired by wishful thinking including a childish faith in the good intentions of others and in the world becoming more and more like America. In this book, we try to slice through this fog of illusion by using various technical economic tools and analytic instruments like deconstruction. The latter has often been a Marxist method of choice, focused on exposing the hidden agenda of the capitalist class. We harness deconstruction to a different purpose. The agendas and stratagems we uncover are those of the makers of public culture – itself a far more heterogeneous, elusive, and powerful phenomenon than ideology.

Our methods allow us to foresee the impending reconfiguration of global wealth and power that which will shape the setting of our security concerns in the half century 2000–2050. The threats that emerge are the consequences

of pronounced and persistent economic trends that are in some important cases far different from what we are commonly led to expect.

The deconstruction of public culture permits us to appreciate why our leaders deny what is otherwise evident, and why they are perpetually tilting at windmills with ethereal swords like nation-building and democratization.

Finally, we identify a more effective position for America – strategic independence – addressing not only terrorism but also the next wave of dangers posed by Russia, China and possibly the European Union. Strategic independence accords preeminence to our country’s defense in place of moralistic or utopian visions.

Two Americans born during World War II have written this book, employing five major disciplines – leadership, economics, geopolitics, history and national security. No single author could cover all these areas effectively, and we, the two authors of this book, draw on each other’s strengths to integrate insights from the five disciplines into a coherent whole.

Part of this book discusses the defense and foreign policy positions of the George W. Bush administration from a pragmatic point of view. It has not been possible to do this previously because its principles had not yet been much embodied in foreign policy. But in the late summer of 2002, the Bush administration enunciated important principles in its statement, “The National Security Strategy of the United States,” and then applied them in Afghanistan and Iraq. Hence, we can now review the application and execution of Bush’s foreign policy and defense principles and comment on their strengths and limitations.

We are critical of mainstream conventional political debate. This is because much of today’s political dialogue obscures more issues than it illuminates – it’s at best oblique to the major concerns; at worse it completely distorts them. For example, the critical matter of the impact of the American invasion of Iraq in carrying the battle to the terrorists is twisted into a question of whether or not the streets of Iraq are safe. So-called democracy-building in Iraq displaces the battle against Islamic terrorism and insurrection as the key concern of American policy in the Middle East (after all, democracy is a characteristic of states, and if it contributes to peace, it does so by making a nation less likely to go to war; but terrorism and insurrection are a nonstate activity and aren’t likely to be much influenced by a shift to democracy). The conventional political debate also settles for labels that don’t describe what they’re labeling and vague terms that aren’t specific. The political dialogue is infused with partisan concerns; much of the popular media pretending to inform the public about the issues is driven by hidden agendas that are both partisan and financial and so by

choice of editorial content, by disguise of partisan argument as news, and by selective reporting of events, often mislead the public.

The English economist Alfred Marshall penned our point of view succinctly. “What is most wanted now,” he wrote, “is the power of keeping the head cool and clear in tracing and analyzing the combined action of many . . . causes.”<sup>1</sup> The duty of responsible commentators is to be certain that their observations are verified, and not merely projections of their wishes or methods they employ for the manipulation of others.

Sometimes in the discussion below we may sound critical of aspects of our country and its policies. Some of our readers may wonder if a frank discussion that sometimes points to limitations of our presidents in the way they’ve handled foreign affairs and military conflicts is unpatriotic. We think it is not. All great world leaders have had catastrophic failures; it is how they learn from those debacles and what they do afterward that makes them great. Furthermore, America stands at the threshold of a major shift in our country’s role in the world and in our attitude toward it, so that failure to choose leaders who do a better job in foreign relations may be catastrophic. A frank and objective look at our failings as well as our successes is needed and is not unfair to America.

This is one of the first postneoconservative books, critiquing the neoconservative defense and foreign policy positions of the Bush Administration from a realist position. We offer neither a liberal nor a neocon point of view, but instead a middle-of-the-road American point of view free of wishful thinking moderate but strong; not a Europhile and diplomatic (that is, largely conventional and dishonest) expression, but an authentic, thought-out, down-to-earth expression. This book expresses the view of the majority of the American electorate who defend our government while being willing to criticize it in a friendly manner; reject the condescending views offered us by the spokespersons of many of our erstwhile Western European allies; and are prepared to adopt a new strategic posture for our nation in the world – one of Strategic Independence – believing it best in future prospect for ourselves and the world.

In writing this book, we rely much on information from expert sources – the kind that is suppressed or misinterpreted by the public culture. We identify such sources carefully, including our own research. But this book is not a treatise based on factual revelations. Rather, the book is unified by the patterns that emerge from decoding and deconstructing American public culture.

In our research, we used both primary and secondary sources, in large part because the breadth of our approach and our subject matter prohibited

reliance on primary sources only. In general, in our economics research we used primary sources; in our leadership and national defense research we used both primary and secondary sources; and in our historical research we used mostly secondary and some primary sources. Wherever we used secondary sources, we've attempted to identify the sources and give their authors full credit for their work.

The two models presented in the book are both of our authorship. The model of the public culture is qualitative; the economic model is both qualitative and quantitative.

We strive for two key elements in our approach:

- Objectivity about situations, based on facts not wishes, opinions, nor partisanship; and
- Consistency in our analysis.

We attempt to be fact-driven. We do not start from ideology, first principles or political partisanship. Our models are empirically validated (that is, they are scientific) to be best of our or others' abilities. If facts push in one direction, we go there, recrafting our concepts to fit the facts, not the facts to fit our concepts. That's our basic objection to the public culture – that it continually lets wishful thinking shape its perception of facts. When this happens and our leaders are drawn into its snare, our country is unable to successfully confront challenges to our security.

The book is organized in a way intended to help the reader grasp its content. We first address the public culture of the United States in order that a reader may be assisted in breaking free mentally from predispositions about the other topics of the book. Readers will not be able to appreciate our prioritization of the issues discussed until they have mastered the concept of public culture, and how to decode the American version. This is a very unusual approach to a book on these topics. Most writers start with their worldview, treat it as self evident, and then never defend their assumptions and convictions. We make our explicit at the outset, in an attempt to improve understanding of our position.

## Executive Summary

Since the Soviet Union's collapse, the United States has failed to secure a complete and lasting peace, and we now find ourselves facing as great a nuclear threat as before the end of the Cold War due to nuclear modernization in China and Russia and to nuclear proliferation in India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Iran.

America's most immediate foreign engagement is the war on terror, but it is not the most important challenge we face. Our most important challenge remains what it has been for more than sixty years: to avoid a nuclear exchange between great powers.

However, the international situation is now becoming destabilized by major changes in the fate of the great powers, in particular Russia's decline and China's rise. A major driver of potential conflict among the great powers is the struggle for power and wealth among nations – belying the rhetoric of economic harmonization. Divergent national economic cultures and different rates of economic growth over a long period acerbate tensions – a process that is more likely to end in overt conflict than in peaceful transition.

By 2010, Russia will choose to remilitarize and will be building fifth-generation nuclear capability. Meanwhile, China will be enlarging and modernizing its nuclear missile capability and by 2020 will emerge as a much more effective rival to America and our allies (especially Taiwan and Japan) than it now is.

The leaders of our nation have trouble being objective in identifying threats and responding to them because of the public's wishful thinking, which creates illusions about the world and our role in it. The illusions comprise a public culture that generates inappropriate policy options based on simplistic and distorted understandings about the true threats to America's safety. Wishful thinking causes us to underestimate danger and to overestimate our strength, thereby tempting us to overreach abroad through trying

to export, with the help of force, our economic and political culture. We ourselves are the enemy of our survival and we can save ourselves by recognizing it and rectifying our misperceptions.

American foreign policy must be overhauled in order to avoid major wars by abandoning the strategy of balance of power that characterized the Cold War and instead now seeking to attain independence in our strategic positioning. We can't trust our past allies any more because of diverging interests and hidden agendas. It is important that this evolution in our policy be carefully thought through in order that a predictable approach replace today's confusion of purposes and means.

A new policy of Strategic Independence for America involves enhancing our military power via continuing the revolution in military affairs and adding significant additional defense capabilities.

America needs a transition path to cope with the growing risk of nuclear war – a path that simultaneously places restraints on our aggressiveness in the world's economic and political interplay to mollify our adversaries' fears, while utilizing our technological and economic strength to deter potential breakers of the peace.

From the standpoint of national security, what needs to be done by the United States is:

- Recognize the likely threat sequence – terrorism, Russia, China, Europe – and allocate to each its proper priority as the threats mature.
- Respond to each threat via Strategic Independence. Strategic Independence doesn't require a crash program or crusade. We can do it subtly with discreet persistence.
- Reform our public culture by disavowing wishful thinking and recognizing its distorting influence on our attitudes toward the United Nations, the European Union, and multilateralism.
- Encourage Russia and China to Westernize their economies and governance, and to abandon military modernization along an authoritarian trajectory, which is where both – contrary to much reporting and comments by our media and political leadership – are now headed.

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Steven Rosefelde and Quinn Mills

## ONE

### A World Wounded

I speak of peace while covert enmity under the smile of safety wounds the world.  
Shakespeare, **Henry IV**, part 2, lines 9–10.

#### THE POST-COLD WAR SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

For a brief moment, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it seemed that the great powers had agreed on a desired outcome: a world characterized by democratic free enterprise with social justice. And it appeared to follow that this new world order could be speedily achieved by liberalization and disarmament. The objective remains, but the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, Russia's failed transition to democratic free enterprise, China's military modernization and internal political repression, the persistence of hidden agendas among the great powers that cripples the United Nations and the specter of accelerated nuclear proliferation have undermined the high hopes. The new situation has raised the possibility that the United States will explore the possibility of a very different path to its long run objectives – that is, a different short- and middle-term defense strategy. The different path includes the willingness to fight conventional wars and preemptive attacks. This is a very different agenda than liberalization and disarmament. This change has generated much controversy because many prefer trying to build the new world with the previous methods. Such a preference remains a tenable position insofar as it is based on an objective assessment of the risks, but too often the preference is dogmatic, raising serious problems for responsible leaders.

The issue with which this book is concerned is the defense of America; it is not limited to military response only, but in the broader perspective of our foreign policy – how do we defend ourselves in a world full of current



and potential antagonists. We are not focused on public relations (winning hearts and minds abroad) or on crusades for democracy abroad but, rather, on the combination of diplomatic and military activities that constitute a national security strategy.

Our topic is the international relations of America with special emphasis on our defense policy. To discuss the topic adequately, two major concepts are introduced: our nation's *public culture* (the patchwork of beliefs and managed attitudes governing public debate that often allows policymakers to find consensus through trans-partisan wishful thinking), which constitutes the key political context of defense policy; and the concept of *strategic independence* (the ability to protect America without extraneous multilateralist constraints imposed by others) toward which our defense policy is evolving. Unfortunately the two are in conflict.

In this book, we survey the new security environment including the possibility of a successful change in America's short- and middle-term strategy. At the core of the difficulty of such a shift in strategy is a daunting problem of combating disinformation provided by apparently reliable sources in an effort to distort public perceptions and exploit public cultural wishful thinking for commercial or partisan reasons.

Consequently, there is an urgent need for sophisticated leaders capable of effectively pursuing the new strategy with methods that take account of the ways obstructionists coopt public culture and impair global security for private purposes. While little is entirely new, modern communication technologies and informational warfare tactics seem to mark a quantum change from the past.

The requirements of an American President in international relations are to

- see the big picture objectively;
- appreciate the complex interplay of factors;
- actively and purposefully learn;
- integrate hard and soft information, with the help of intelligence agencies but not relying on them slavishly;
- create novel scenarios and approaches for our policy; and
- set our national goals with imagination and insight.

Logic and decency can prevail in the current international setting, but for this to happen opportunists and those with ulterior motives must be beaten at their own image management game. This is why a president must master the illusions with which the minds of people are filled.

Richard Neustadt and the scholars who follow him make sophisticated excuses for weaknesses in presidential leadership. They describe a president who is captive of others in government and of the limited powers of the presidency. This they describe as due to institutional constraints, and proceed to recommend different methods by which a president might loosen the constraints. Neustadt in particular recommends that presidents master the art of persuasion, not that much different from the view expressed here that effective presidents must master the illusions of those they should lead.<sup>1</sup> But it is proper to have higher expectations of leaders than do these presidential scholars. Leadership is not simply about holding office and developing policy. This is an old view of leadership that confuses office (which is no more than an opportunity to exert leadership) with leadership. Leadership has been much more studied in recent decades in the context of business than of politics, and the insights from that study have yet to be fully applied to the political context. The study of leadership in business has concluded that leadership is not administrative, nor even managerial, in its essence, but is different – leadership involves inspiring others to exertions in a direction that is the leader’s vision. Leadership is about managing change. As Jack Welch, then CEO of General Electric, once put it to a group of GE managers, “No matter how good a manager you are, unless you can energize others, you are of no use to our company as a leader.” Note that Mr. Welch did not presume that there was only one leader in GE, the CEO, nor did he presume that there could not be leadership demonstrated at many levels of the company. Leadership in his view and that of most management scholars is a function, not a position or office. This basic distinction, which allows clear thinking about leadership and its role in organizations, is currently not common in the literature that studies American presidents.<sup>2</sup>

When the modern managerial concept of leadership is applied to American presidents, then the institutional constraints they face are recognized to be real, but also to be challenges to their effectiveness as leaders – not simply excuses for their failures, as Neustadt sees the institutional constraints. This is why mastering illusions is so important – it is crucial to persuading people to loosen the institutional constraints on a president. Loosening constraints is part of the task of a leader, not an excuse for failure. Focusing on institutional constraints is at best only part of the story, and not its most fundamental part, and is at worst an excuse for ineffective leadership.

Effective presidential leadership involves the loosening of institutional constraints. Examples can be found in American history of this. For example,

Abraham Lincoln rode roughshod over legal and congressional constraints to win the Civil War, including suspending the writ of habeas corpus during much of the war. Harry Truman seized the nation's steel industry during the Korean War to keep production going in the face of a strike. When the Supreme Court told him that was illegal (which he probably already knew), he gave the steel mills back to their owners. About this episode George Taylor quipped, "The President has saved the country, and the Supreme Court has saved the Constitution." That there may be only a few such examples is a comment on the poor quality of presidential leadership in America, not evidence of an intractable situation in which presidents are allegedly placed. Why then does scholarship so often explain away presidential incapacity? First, presidents who try to lead and fail do not like that pointed out. They don't see it that way, and neither do their followers and adherents. Second, our electorate generally is very forgiving, having low expectations of presidential leadership. Third, academics rationalize presidential failures and describe their rationalizations as explanations. It requires much self-discipline of academics to avoid this trap, in presidential studies and other fields.

Samuel Kernal describes an "institutional pluralism" in which president's are successful by meeting the needs of interest groups, to which they appeal via the mass media, and in which public opinion or public pressure has little impact on politics.<sup>3</sup> This is a largely valid model of the functioning of the presidency in day-to-day politics, but it overlooks fundamental elements of the context of public discussion, including most importantly, the public culture, which presidents must either master or to which they must pander. The public culture puts bounds on political action, most important in foreign policy that of the president, in ways that are not inconsistent with Kernal's conception, but have a much greater impact on what happens than he appreciates.

The difficulty of a president mastering the public culture has been noted by researchers who study the presidency. "Even 'great communicators' usually fail to obtain the public's support for their high-priority initiatives," wrote George C. Edwards. As a prime example of his point, Edwards quoted Ronald Reagan about his presidency: "One of my greatest frustrations was my inability to communicate to the American people . . . the seriousness of the threat we faced in Central America."<sup>4</sup> In fact, Reagan was unable to overcome the public culture in this matter, and it left his presidency permanently soiled via the Iran-Contra affair.

It is significant not only that there is a public culture (which is anterior to and helps form public opinion), but also that it is a set of significant

propositions that are often factually incorrect. Because they are wrong, a president is not only constrained by them but gets entangled in their unreality – unable to do the things he or she believes are crucial for the country because the public generally does not recognize the problems the president is confronting.

Presidents have potentially more accurate information about developments and dangers in the world than others, but only if certain requirements are met. The information they receive must not be:

- too filtered
- too condensed
- too edited

for the reality of situations to emerge to the president's view; and the President must have a valid framework in which to interpret information.

These are not readily achieved requirements. In fact, many presidents have received overly filtered, overly condensed, overly edited information and have lacked a valid framework, meaning an understanding of the dynamics of international rivalries and interests, to correctly interpret accurate information when they receive it. The result is that more and better information about current events hasn't been enough for them to grasp the reconfiguration of global wealth and power that is evidenced in this book.

#### THE NEED TO ADJUST ILLUSION TO REALITY

We Americans are making our way through a very difficult period in international affairs, risking conflicts of a major nature because of a basic inability to see the world objectively. We dream of peace while enmity endangers the United States and the world. Ironically, enmity is overt from the least potentially dangerous of our antagonists, Islamic terrorists, and covert from the most potentially dangerous, the Russians and Chinese. At the heart of our danger is a public culture that distorts information and a political process that panders to it. A significant consequence is that the nation's leadership, in particular the President of the United States, must deal with public illusions in order to effectively lead the nation's defense policy.

We need to understand this aspect of the presidency because our survival in the nuclear age depends on correctly identifying the true threats to our national security. In this book the case is made for a revolutionary reconceptualization of American international security policy in which a foreseeable sequence of threats is addressed adaptively without the illusion of a panacea of idealized democratic free enterprise the world over.

This book is an attempt to help our country toward a constructive objectivity about international relations. Attaining objectivity requires these six key elements:

1. The concept of public culture, a key to understanding why America acts as it does in the world arena;
2. A description of the striking disjuncture between the real issues of the day and what is featured in public debate and by the popular media;
3. Empirical findings regarding the limits of attempts to create market democracies, with examples from Russia and Iraq;
4. Examination of the widespread coopting of public needs for private purposes in this country and abroad;
5. A rigorous critique of both neoconservative ideology and current practice and that of their opponents – a critique grounded in a cross-disciplinary collaboration of the study of leadership, national security policy, and economics; and
6. The concept of a peaceful global community accommodating diversity among nations that is reflected in different economic and political systems.

That the great challenge of international policy is to adjust illusion to reality is increasingly evident to observers. “For the past generation and more,” wrote political observer Anatol Lieven, “western democracies have been engaged in a great experiment, with unregulated television and the tabloid press as the chief instruments. We are testing how long liberal democracies can survive if their peoples . . . become ever more lazy, ignorant and prone to irrational beliefs . . .”<sup>5</sup>

There are two ways for the experiment of which Lieven speaks to have a good outcome. The first is to weaken the illusions that dominate the mosaic of partisan beliefs and trans-partisan wishful thinking that constitute our public culture. The second is to find presidents who are masters of illusions – who take our country in the right direction despite the confusion of the public.

Public culture is not pop culture, which is primarily entertainment centered. It is a crazy quilt of beliefs, elements of which are shared by a large number of people that is informally managed by the media, governs the content of public debate about national issues (dissenters are ostracized), allowing political leaders (not “policy makers”) to build bipartisan support by appealing to popular wishful thinking. Examples of the latter include faith in the miraculous power of democracy, globalization, nation-building, reason, and goodwill. Public culture is a collective public mind, which like the minds of individuals is often divided, carrying on an internal dialogue,

but in the end conforms to strong behavior regularities. Pop culture is a parallel culture which is not primarily news- and politics-centered. Public culture is ordinarily expressed in local and national newscasts, newspapers, Sunday morning talk shows, internet blogs, and the statements of pundits and politicians. Pop culture and public culture sometimes overlap, as in Hollywood-produced motion pictures and television series with political settings or in popular music with political messages.

Because illusions play such a great role in the political process there are three major consequences for the citizen who wants to be knowledgeable:

First: People who rely on popular media and cocktail conversations are usually misled, and when they have strong feelings about national security issues, they appear foolish to those who gather information in more sophisticated ways;

Second: People who want to be objectively knowledgeable will be in a more uncomfortable position than adherents of the public culture because the public culture provides refuge from thought and the effort of getting real information; it assures people that they know and understand, when they do not; and

Third: People who want to be really knowledgeable must work at getting information; they must go beneath the public culture and avoid partisanship; this can be done, but only with effort.

Furthermore, the dominant role of illusions in the nation's political process has three major consequences for our presidents:

1. Public culture encourages piecemeal problem solving, disregarding the interrelationships of threats believing its wishful thinking, so that a president almost never gets to the bottom of the problems he or she addresses.
2. The success of a president depends on his or her ability to master the illusions of the public – a very subtle and complex task.
3. A president to be successful has to be almost *schizoid* – he or she must watch the public culture because it's the field in which politics is played out, but must also watch reality to make sense of what's happening in the world and as a basis for actions. A president must take actions that are necessary on an objective basis and simultaneously present them to the public in a form that makes them acceptable.

This is a requirement of the presidency that has sometimes been noted in the past. "If the foreign policy of a state is to be practical," wrote a strategist early in World War II, "it should be defined not in terms of some dream world but in terms of the realities of international relations . . ." <sup>6</sup> Had his admonition been heeded in the period before the war, there need not have been so great and perilous a struggle as the World War II.

Despite the attention of commentators and academic analysts to the topic, the last thing in the world which is obvious is the state of global play among the nations. The only way to bring sense to our policies addressing the world situation is first to appraise it objectively, and this is almost impossible in the context of our public culture.

#### PUBLIC CULTURE DISTORTS REALITY

How is objectivity to be attained in a world of illusions driven by wishful thinking and political partisanship, and how is a president to master the illusions of those he or she leads?

Americans are not the only people prone to wishful thinking and illusions, of course. For example, one of the founders of Indian democracy, Jawaharlal Nehru, wrote to his daughter Indira, “Only in one country can it be said that economic freedom has been won by the people generally, and that is Russia, or rather, the Soviet Union.”<sup>7</sup> Nehru apparently wanted to find an example of economic freedom somewhere in the world and let himself think wishfully that it was in the Soviet Union. For years, millions of people around the world shared this delusion.

Mass opinion is not something on which objective decisions can be based. It’s a hotbed of illusions – whether it’s an electorate or a consumer market. Consumer marketers know this (as Charles Revlon is said to have observed about the cosmetics business, “In our factories we make chemicals; in our stores we sell hope”), and so do political consultants. A president knows this as well.

Unless the cultural prejudices and subtle defense mechanisms that bias presidential action and policy making are identified and corrected, then public discourse cannot deal with the realities confronting the nation.

Public culture is a set of socially approved attitudes, values, analytic procedures and decision-making mechanisms transcending and encompassing partisan diversity that shape and often distort national perceptions of reality and appropriate action.

Public culture, except in ideal circumstances, provides only a semblance of reality; it systematically distorts our comprehension with false presumptions created by certain social, political, and economic characteristics of America and its media to gloss unpalatable realities. The result is poor judgment and dysfunctional behaviors that cause major errors in national policy.

The following diagram presents the sequence of discussion in the chapters that follow.

PUBLIC CULTURE

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SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF AMERICA		yield	DYSFUNCTIONAL BEHAVIORS	yield	ILLUSIONS	yield
Wishful Thinking by the public			Simplification		Convergence	
Partisanship in politics			Hype		Harmonism	
Commercialism in the Media			Distortion			

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CONFUSION ABOUT REALITY		yields	LACK OF OBJECTIVITY	yields	POOR JUDGMENT	yields	POLICY ERRORS
Misinformation			Misperception		Wrong		Mistaken
Disinformation			Misapprehension		Objectives		actions
			Disproportionality		Wrong Methods		Missed opportunities
					Wrong Priorities		
					Wrong Justifications		

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Wishful thinking about the peoples and nations of the world is a long-standing characteristic of the American people. For example, before both world wars of the twentieth century most Americans were convinced that we could keep out of war.

Partisanship in politics that distorts the truth for party gain is almost as old as our republic.

A commercially motivated media that supplies most of our news about the world is now firmly entrenched in our society.

These three factors – wishful thinking, partisanship, and a commercially motivated media – drive dysfunctional behaviors that are a key part of American public culture. Matters are simplified, distorted, and hyped by politicians and the media to serve party and commercial interests by preying on the public’s wishful thinking. Dysfunctional behaviors result in deeply held illusions by the public: the notions of harmonism – that most peoples and nations are well-intentioned and fair-minded and that as a result conflict among nations is almost always a result of misunderstandings – and convergence – that all countries of the world are moving toward a form of Western capitalist democracy.

These powerful illusions create a fog of misinformation (mistakes and errors) and disinformation (lies) about the world situation, so that we are



confused about the reality in which we live. Confusion yields a lack of objectivity in which we routinely misperceive, misapprehend and are unable to place matters in a proper relationship of importance one to another. Lack of objectivity results in poor judgment – both by the nation and its leaders – so that we frequently develop wrong objectives, methods, priorities and justifications for our actions in the world. Poor judgment leads to major policy errors – including mistaken actions and missed opportunities. In an increasingly complex, changing, and treacherous world, such errors are very dangerous.

There are two forms of lack of objectivity:

1. Failure to perceive reality – that is, wearing a form of blinders; and
2. Failure to devise a solution relevant to a problem – that is, applying a preconceived or all-purpose solution to whatever problem is encountered.

Public culture brings both forms of nonobjectivity to American foreign policy on a large scale.

#### ANTITERRORISM MEASURES ARE NOT ENOUGH

The most serious lack of objectivity and consequent errors that we are now experiencing involve Islamic terror. The likely troubles of the next few decades are not limited to terrorism but are on a grander scale. In consequence, American national defense strategy must be about more than defending against acts of terrorist violence. There are challenges emerging from major powers that must be addressed, and that are entitled to higher priority.

Terrorism below the nuclear threshold is an awful thing, but nuclear war is a *mortal threat*. Confusing us about this is one of the greatest disservices which our public culture makes to our national survival. Our most significant potential enemies won't resort to terror – it's a weapon of the weak. While we're spending our time, treasure and blood in Iraq trying to prevent another terrorist attack that could kill thousands of Americans, both Russia and China are modernizing their nuclear weaponry that might kill millions of us.

There is now a consensus that great power warfare is highly unlikely. Both government agencies and private organizations participate, echoing each others' views and pointing to each other as evidence that their views are correct. The United States government tells us this.<sup>8</sup> So do private experts: "The United Nations was founded when the gravest danger facing mankind was

aggressive wars by industrialized states marching armies across borders.”<sup>9</sup> The implication is that no longer are wars by industrialized states a significant danger. But this is true only in the very short run. In fact, aggressive wars are very much a danger in our not-so-distant future, though the industrialized states likely to be involved are not the same ones as in the mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, and most important, the danger that such wars present to humanity is now enormously increased by the proliferation of atomic weapons.

The challenges we face are the consequences of major, long-term developments in the world economy and demographics, including dramatic shifts in international wealth and power among nations – it is these shifts that are driving both Russia and China and others of our rivals, though in different directions. Projections of national economic growth over the next several decades are the bridge between discussions of the military potential of possible adversaries and the strategy that is best for the United States. Such projections offer measures of the strength of our possible adversaries and of our own ability to counter them.

This book presents economic and military forecasts for world powers and the strategy necessary for America to best confront mounting dangers.

Following are key propositions about America leadership and the world situation:

- American presidential leadership must master a public culture full of illusions about the world;
- Major economic and demographic changes among the nations of the world are certain to generate conflict;
- Adjustment to change is the big new demand on the international order; and
- The international order is full of interdependencies which cannot be objectively assessed in the context of analysis on a country-by-country basis, but must instead be assessed in the context of a limited number of vortexes of danger each involving many countries.

A major reconfiguration of wealth and power among nations is under way. It poses problems that our public culture is preventing most people from facing squarely. Our country’s leaders need to do three things:

1. Objectively assess our risks and vulnerabilities;
2. Try to limit the scope of conflict so that as little damage occurs as possible; and
3. Be sure we prevail in any contest.

Today:

- America has the economic and military potential to chart its own strategic path in the future without needing to placate others. We call this approach Strategic Independence (SI) and recommend it as the national defense strategy of the United States.
- The prospects for the economic, technological and political development of the United States are so favorable compared to most other nations that there is little likelihood of the United States entering a period of significant decline in international influence, unless our leadership blunders badly (a possibility that is all too possible, given the context of wishful thinking about global issues in which an American president must act).

William Odom and Robert Dujarric note that the United States has such strengths in its economy, demographics, science, technology, and education that the major threat is not a rival power but ineffective U.S. leadership.<sup>10</sup> We currently have considerable friction with many of our former allies because the end of the Cold War is dividing our interests. The United States is progressing toward a peak in its international leadership, and our former allies are receding in relative economic strength, military power, national resolve, and international influence. Many of our former allies now approach us with an attitude of resentment akin to that of the Greeks in the first century B.C.E. as they contemplated the rising power of Rome and desperately sought to subject it to their leadership. As Polybius, a first century B.C.E. Greek, told his fellows: “As, in other states, a man is rarely found whose hands are pure from public robbery, so, among the Romans, it is no less rare to discover one that is tainted with this crime. But all things are subject to decay and change.” Thus, it is that envious rivals await the decay of America.

- The United States will have to adroitly manage two major powers undergoing dramatic transitions in the decades ahead, each in opposite directions. Russia is entering a permanent decline; in the transition we must carefully avoid an occasion in which Russia will employ its still formidable military force against us. The power of China will wax in the next two decades, while resurgent nationalism threatens to turn Chinese economic advances from peaceful trade to military adventure. We must forestall a military confrontation until the long-term disadvantages of the Chinese economic culture begin to negate its current advantages of backwardness (that is, of the relatively easy course of economic catchup), a dynamic that has previously occurred for Russia, Eastern Europe and Japan.

The best way to deal with international discord is a geopolitical strategy in which the United States seeks increasing independence from its erstwhile allies. This is a similar strategy to that which, when employed by the Bush Administration in Iraq, encountered bitter criticism. We do not recommend that America abandon engagement with other nations, but that we refuse to accept foreign control over our security policies and defense expenditures.

If properly informed, Americans are likely to embrace Strategic Independence (and our friends abroad will understand why Americans do so). Such is popular sovereignty – the core value of democracy. Americans are also likely to reject the claims of outsiders to transgress in our elections, or impose their laws or perspectives or interests upon us.

#### MASTERING THE ILLUSIONS OF THE PUBLIC CULTURE

The American public and its political figures and opinion makers have for more than a century persistently indulged in wishful thinking, and steadfastly refused to learn from their errors. This unfortunate behavior is the result of an indulgent attitude that governs public perceptions, cognition, and policy making. The vibrant partisan rivalry between Democrats and Republicans is not sufficient to alter the situation; instead, the partisan contest is waged within a largely unitary public culture that circumscribes much more narrowly than most Americans realize the content and realism of the political controversy.

Public culture discouraged most people from understanding that there is a system, not merely a discrete set of relationships, among nations – a system involving the economics, rivalries, and power relationships among nations. For a metaphor, think of Robert Penn Warren’s description of human life in his novel *All the King’s Men* as a spider web that when touched anywhere, vibrates to its furthest corner and alerts the spider. There are connections among all decisions and actions the United States takes regarding the world, and, the proper way to address these situations is as problems in optimization – to choose the best among the set of options available for U.S. international and defense policy.

Furthermore, public comprehension is made almost impossible when media and commentators deny the interrelationships; when the so-called news media is full of disinformation; and when muddled thinking is reinforced continually (for partisan political and commercial purposes) in the public culture. “Supporting opinions we already have is what keeps this mediated [that is, media-driven] culture buzzing, the scribblers scribbling, the talking heads talking, the bloggers blogging.”<sup>11</sup>

America should adopt a self-reliant national security policy for the next several decades that doesn't depend on the goodwill of other nations.

The statistics in this book show that the comparative superiority of America's long run economic performance and our willingness to bear the burden of a powerful military make it reasonable to suppose that a strategy of Strategic Independence is viable for us in the long term. But one would be compelled to draw the opposite conclusion, if beguiled by the current rhetoric about globalism and convergence. We present statistics and rely on them to a great extent to avoid the dangers of discussion without quantitative support, so well described by Macaulay when writing about England during the reign of James II. Without a census, Macaulay wrote, "All men were left to conjecture for themselves; and as they generally conjectured without examining facts, and under the influence of strong passions and prejudices, their guesses were often ludicrously absurd."<sup>12</sup> Facts help us to limit the influence of strong passions and prejudices with regard to our topic.

Assessing the objective circumstances of the world situation and its trends is necessary for two reasons:

1. To know the facts in order to identify distortions in the public culture, otherwise there would be no objective standards to measure the media and political partisans against; and because
2. There is significant intrinsic interest in the world situation itself.

The leadership of most American administrations is unwilling to tell us directly, even if it wishes to, what it is doing because most of us are not prepared to understand. We are instead misled by misperceptions grounded in our own wishful thinking. A successful president must become a master of illusions – our illusions, making sure that they do not become his.

This should not surprise us. Product marketing is about illusions; and so is political marketing. In the White House a president makes policy; in the media he responds to wishes. This is not a characteristic of this administration alone; it's likely that any American administration would do much the same. In fact, it's hard to imagine how it could remain in power if it failed to address the public culture in its own terms. The problem is how to rise above the dangerous limitations of the public culture.

The full context of the presidential leadership problem includes public misperceptions, media position-taking, and partisan distortions. Describing the impact of public culture on national security policy formation offers a basis for guidance to our leaders in mastering public illusions.

The myths that populate the American public culture are not peace-making myths; they contribute to war as much as try to avoid it, although not intentionally. For example, the myth that the rest of the world is moving toward and would be made more peaceful by conversion to American style democratic free enterprise (a self-affirming illusion) has helped prolong our involvement in Iraq and the fighting in which we are engaged there.

Other nations have their own public cultures, adding an additional layer of obfuscation that must be penetrated by an effective leader. A president who is able to penetrate the pitfalls of our own and other cultures, and employ his insights in the national interest, is freed from being a prisoner of wishful thinking and is instead a Master of Illusions.

#### CHAPTER 1: KEY POINTS

1. The American president operates in the context of the public's wishful thinking which creates illusions about the world and our role in it. The illusions are an integral part of a public culture that generates inappropriate policy options based upon simplistic and distorted understandings about the true threats to America's safety.
2. To operate effectively within the public culture, the American president must understand what the real threats to America's security are so that effective defense policy can be developed. The president has a choice about whether to communicate within the public culture or to be more candid with the American people about the motives and methods of defense policy.
3. Strategic Independence is proper defense strategy for America in the current era. It should replace multilateralism and mutual assured destruction(MAD) as our policies. Strategic Independence should play the defense role in a self-reliant, multisystem approach to world politics.

## FIVE

### Mythomaniacs

#### *The Sources of Our Illusions*

Mere facts are worthless except through their interpretation.

Will Durant, *The Life of Greece*, pg. 615

There is never a mere listing of facts, for they are too many and too confusing; they have no meaning without a context. What facts are chosen to be reported, and the interpretation which gives them meaning, are what public culture, the collective public mind decides. When the context is not accurate, as when it's distorted for partisan or commercial aims, then there can be no assurance that people understand what is really happening and that decisions can be made properly in response to events.

Media stories, especially on TV, are often so shallow, so carefully selected, so contrived, so subordinated to a predetermined story line, that they're not news at all, not even infotainment (because there's almost no information in them), but are merely entertainment posing as new reporting. Commentators choose hype instead of balanced reporting because they can't pen compelling headlines when interdependencies create gray zones instead of stark black and whites.

To justify such inferior communications, and to keep people interested, media executives and political activists create myths – stories that are compelling though not true or only partially true. In recent years, our public culture has passed into the hands of people who do this well – who are myth-builders, and many of us, avid consumers of myths in the disguise of information, have become mythomaniacs. What most characterizes the myths of today is that they derive from and embody the wishful thinking in which most of us engage.

## THE AMERICAN PUBLIC'S WISHFUL THINKING

Many Americans are optimists about the world, a characteristic often remarked by people from abroad. An expression of our optimism is that we engage in wishful thinking on a grand scale. We see a world in which other people are generally like us, wanting what we want and, if they have freedom and the right laws and the kind of economic system we have, will be our friends, not our adversaries. Some of us believe that all the people of the world are basically like us despite superficial differences of culture, and if given a chance to choose peace will be our friends and allies; others believe that all or most of the nations of the world are converging toward our economic and political system, and that when that occurs, the world will be peaceful at last.

Wishful thinking makes what seems to be a benign assumption: that the people of other nations are like us underneath superficial cultural differences, and if we can only communicate effectively and take their legitimate needs into consideration, there will be peace and harmony in the world.

Today, many Americans presume that the natural laws of economics, politics, and human society necessitate happy endings. Many Americans assume that economies will, if left to their own devices, generate economic growth; that nations prefer peace to war; and that global stability increases with time. These naïve assumptions mischaracterize natural law, which is complex, generates diverse outcomes, and often ends in catastrophe.

Wishful thinking holds that improving living standards is both a good in itself and a contributor to peace. A great illusion is that economic progress is enough in itself – that it can be timely and sufficiently rapid – to make peace in the world. We wish for peace. To support that wish we presume that all the peoples of the world want peace, and all the nations, too. Where aggression exists, it does so primarily because of wrongs, either current or past, that can be righted, or misunderstandings that can be corrected, ending the impulse of anger or despair that generated conflict.

As evidence, wishful thinkers cite what they perceive as the evolution of the world toward peace among all peoples. Here's a statement of that hopeful conviction: "We know from archaeology that the amount of warfare has declined markedly over the course of human history and that peace can prevail under the right circumstances. In spite of the conflict we see around us, we are doing better, and there is less warfare in the world today than there ever has been. Ending it may be a slow process, but we are making headway. . . . History shows that people with strong animosities stop fighting after adequate resources are established and the benefits of cooperation



recognized. . . . Adequate food and opportunity does not instantly translate into peace, but it will, given time.”<sup>1</sup> It is in this sort of supposed evidence that the illusion of harmonism finds its roots.

Wishful thinking also results in a convergence view – economic growth along market-oriented principles drives nations in only one direction: toward peace. It holds as well that economic forces are more important than other forces. A report put the matter recently, “Taiwan has invaded Mainland China – with jobs and capital. Politics will adapt to the new reality.”<sup>2</sup> This comment is unexceptionable if it means only that where there is a new economic reality, political processes will somehow accommodate to them. But if it has a stronger meaning – that peace will follow trade – then it is patently false. Peace may follow trade, but war may also follow, of which history has given ample evidence.

Because harmonism is an illusion to which liberals are especially inclined, and convergence is an illusion of special attraction to conservatives, we see that wishful thinking is not limited to either side of the political spectrum. Furthermore, and even more unfortunately, wishful thinking causes both left and right in our political spectrum to engage in a particularly virulent form of self-deception.

### **A Glaring Dishonesty of Wishful Thinking**

A glaring dishonesty – a self-deception on an enormous scale – lies at the heart of approaching foreign policy via wishful thinking – a willingness to deny evil, to take monumental hypocrisy (such as the Chinese and Saudi Arabian guarantees of human rights; or the United Nations’ acceptance of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi as head of its Human Rights Commission) at face value, to excuse horrors, to blame ourselves and blame the victims in order to exonerate the perpetrators. Accepting these terrible things, in order to preserve a conviction that people are rational and peace-seeking, causes wishers to discount threats that are actually very real. Refusing to acknowledge threats discredits wishers claims to power in America today.

Outlawing war, and other notions that have superficial appeal, are a form of wishful thinking – not because war is inevitable; hopefully it is not. In fact, people who accept war in certain situations usually do so not because they favor war or fail to recognize its horrors. But great evils often cannot be eliminated without war. In the case of the United States, the Civil War was necessary to eliminate slavery, and World War II was necessary to eliminate Nazism. Do the people who advocate an end to war thereby signal that they would tolerate slavery or the genocide practiced by the Nazis? Probably not.

They are simply special pleaders, not willing to acknowledge that there are circumstances in which their proposed cure is worse than the disease.

For those who argue that there never has been a just war, was the war to end slavery in America unjust? Was the war to end the Nazi horror unjust? Even if one can imagine that slavery and Nazism could have been ended without war, does that make the wars to end them unjust, or simply unfortunate?

Wishful thinkers must prove they see the world for what it is – dangerous and treacherous (in which our enemies can hide successfully for years) – and to do so they must repent their first sin, excusing Soviet Communism, and condemn Lenin and Stalin (to recognize the full evil in the world, including the bin Ladens) and must show that they really care about the victims, and don't simply write them off as unfortunate road kill in the race toward a better future. Continued whitewashing of the Soviets disqualifies wishful thinkers on the left for power in today's world.

It has always been a deception: using supposedly idealistic goals to try to justify force and brutality. It could be seen as such by moderate people even in the heart of the great ideological controversies of the twentieth century. Glamorizing the Soviets was a vice of the left, but there is no need to cite conservative to make the point. We can turn instead to John Maynard Keynes – for decades the darling of liberals because of his advocacy of interventionist economic policies – who saw the deception clearly.

Writing in 1926 Keynes said, “We lack more than usual a coherent scheme of progress, a tangible ideal. . . . It is not necessary to debate the subtleties of what justifies a man in promoting his gospel by force; for no one has a gospel” [that is, a compelling explanation of the present and ideal for the future]. Because no one, including the communists, had a real vision, what they claimed was an ideology of progress was concocted to rationalize the use of force. Force was used to gain and hold power, not to promote a vision of a better world.<sup>3</sup> Wishful thinkers rejected Keynes's opinions then, and may do so today, preferring a fantasy that keeps them from seeing the full scope of danger and evil in the world. This isn't a mere ideological fantasy (that is, a fantasy about an ideal – like the conservatives' fantasy about perfect competition), but is a fantasy about history itself and about what the world is. Nor is the fantasy a pardonable exaggeration made for political purposes. There is nothing pardonable about the fantasy because of the great evil it caused us to accept in the world – Communist slave labor camps and mass exterminations of people (in the USSR during Stalin's period and more recently in China during the Cultural Revolution).

But liberals are not alone in such wishful thinking; conservatives defend rightist dictatorships (as some did Hitler's regime and that of Mussolini

before World War II). Again, wishful thinking ignores the brutal realities of these regimes.

#### THE DELUSIONS OF WISHFUL THINKING

Wishful thinking prevents us from perceiving the world as it is. Wishful thinking is expressed by, and can mislead, American politicians, thought leaders and citizens at every level. It is not confined to either end of the political spectrum – liberals do it and so do conservatives, and in surprisingly similar ways. Different ends of the political spectrum take their wishes to opposite conclusions. The liberal argues for a less-well-armed America working closely with other powers; the conservative argues for an American remaking the world in our image.

For example, one of the central themes of the Congressionally mandated report on the failures of intelligence that led up to September 11 is that we weren't ready for September 11 because the intelligence community did not want to see it coming. Over many years, people in the field and analysts in Washington and Langley had seen careers ruined because somebody tried to warn the policy makers that trouble was coming. The policy makers didn't want to hear that sort of thing because they were not prepared to do the unpleasant things that knowledge of the real situation required. The ultimate example was the Clinton White House, where the top people simply refused to even receive information about Osama bin Laden's activities in Sudan. Clinton was hardly unique; the NSC under Bush senior simply refused to believe that Saddam would invade Kuwait, and even ignored seemingly incontrovertible information provided the night of the invasion, when General Brent Scowcroft went home early.<sup>4</sup>

The impact of wishful thinking in our public culture is surprisingly significant.

First, it keeps us from perceiving the world as it really is.

Tolerance, pluralism, and conflict avoidance encourage our political and thought leaders to downplay the deficiencies of our rivals, even though their economic and political systems violate all the axioms of western public culture. This approved contradiction in our beliefs prevented American intelligence agencies from correctly assessing the Soviet Union's performance and potential for years, overestimating its provision of consumer goods, underestimating its military strength, and overestimating its internal political cohesion. Wishful thinking also misled them in dealing with the terrorist threats.

Second, wishing leads to underestimating the risk of conflict. If only there were similarity in government (democracy) and economic structure

(capitalist free enterprise), the expectation goes, then there would be geopolitical harmony. But this is also not proven. Because European democracy is pacifist doesn't mean all democracies are similar. In fact, that American democracy today is not pacifist, seems a bitter reproach to the Europeans – something that angers many.

Third, wishing causes us to overreach. For example, in Iraq our highest priority must be that Saddam and his ambitions for weapons of mass destruction and for support of terrorism are gone, and a new Iraqi government doesn't follow him in trying to do those things. Then we've pulled the teeth of the Iraqi demon.

More is not necessary. But more may be desirable. Thus, democracy, capitalism, free markets, liberal attitudes toward women's rights, the love (or the hearts and minds) of the Iraqi people for America – that is, the hopeful agenda – are good things, and we should urge them on the Iraqi people and support them if they seek these things, but all these things are not necessary to our security and if they are rejected by an Iraqi government, we should not press for them.

The danger of wishful thinking is that it causes us to see these good things as required and that in seeking them we overreach ourselves and end up disappointed, disillusioned and perhaps defeated.

Fourth, wishing deflects us from a strong response to threats.

For example, writing in the summer of 2003, Michael Ledeen pointed to two peace initiatives – the Saudi peace plan of 2002 and the roadmap for peace in Palestine in the spring and summer of 2003 – as efforts to stall the American war on terror. Both peace initiatives had been accepted by the Bush Administration and each allowed our enemies in the Mideast and our rivals among the large powers to attempt to frustrate our energetic attacks on terrorism:

Just as the delay after Afghanistan permitted our enemies to organize their political, diplomatic, and terrorist forces against us, so our current defensive stance enables them to intimidate and indoctrinate the Iraqi people, murder our own men and women on the ground, and galvanize the president's critics and opponents, both at home and abroad . . . our regional enemies in Iran and Syria had plenty of time to plan their response to our pending occupation of Iraq. As they unhesitatingly and publicly proclaimed to anyone who cared to listen, they organized a terror war against us, accompanied by jihadist propaganda, mass demonstrations, and hostage seizures, just as we experienced in Lebanon in the 1980s. . . . The president gave voice to a welcome revolutionary doctrine when he refused to deal with Yasser Arafat: He said that just as only free Middle Eastern countries could be expected to abandon terrorism and join us in fighting it, only a free and democratic Palestinian people could make a durable peace with Israel.<sup>5</sup>

This often perceptive article offers a perfect example of how far hopefulness has penetrated almost all American thinking about combating terrorism in the Middle East. The two peace initiatives Ledeen cites were part of a strategy by our adversaries to delay our response, yet they were accepted by the United States as a result of the notion that the world is made up of well-meaning people with whom peace can be made by diplomatic initiatives given adequate time and support.

But Ledeen's proposed remedy, to build democracy in the region as a basis for establishing peace, is itself a version of the same fallacy he otherwise condemns. His remedy reflects the conviction that America should try to export democracy (and most likely free enterprise) expecting it to change the complexion of the region. This is as much an illusion as the expectation of many people that dialogue with our adversaries will bring a just peace. Instead, the reality is that our secure defense lies in destroying the leadership of our enemies, then restricting our further involvement to supporting indigenous efforts at democratization and economic reform, but not imposing them.

It's the effort to impose not only regime change, which has been accomplished, but also democracy and free enterprise that have mired us down in a guerilla war in Iraq. Wishing causes us to overreach; it causes us to equivocate; each is disastrous for our security and one or the other is deeply built into the thinking of Americans of both parties. Thus it is very difficult for America to act in ways consistent with our current role in the world – difficult for us to objectively assess the situation and adopt policies that are in our own interest.

#### POLITICAL PARTISANSHIP

Political parties seek popular support. To gain it, they behave little different than advertisers, seeking to attract an audience, obtain identification with the audience, and then persuade the audience to support them. An effective way of doing this is to associate the party and its candidates with views held by the electorate. The public culture offers those views. For partisan political purposes politicians use and reinforce those views. Partisan politics doesn't create our public culture (the wishful thinking of our electorate is the more basic cause) but it does strongly reinforce our public culture. Thus, political partisanship contributes to the building of the public culture. Without partisanship our public culture would be less significant and different in its context – it might be closer to reality.

For example, President Clinton resonated successfully – but without regard for the truth – with the wishful thinking about a peaceful world which lies at the heart of American popular culture.

“For the first time since the dawn of the nuclear age,” Clinton told his audiences, “on this beautiful night, there is not a single nuclear missile pointed at an American child.” This was a line in one of President Clinton’s stock speeches – a line that always evoked great applause. But it was a lie, as pointed out by the military officer who was at his side carrying the nuclear cipher by which the president could cause the launch of American missiles, should the threat suddenly emerge. Had what the president was saying been true, there would not have been any need for the cipher to be nearby – no need for deterrence. Perhaps Clinton thought his statement was true, because he once lost the cipher completely, so little attention did he pay it.<sup>6</sup> Clinton’s misinforming the American people about this danger should remind us that there are two sorts of dishonesty with which a president can deceive the American people – the lie that danger is greater than it actually is, and the lie that danger is not as great as it actually is.

We are indeed somewhat safer now than during the height of the Cold War, because the threat of a large-scale nuclear exchange among the great powers has been reduced. But we are not safer because our enemies have become friends – as our public culture would have it, via the harmonism and convergence illusions – but because our enemies are weaker than they were. The inability of many Americans to accept this – because they hope for a world better than it is – is one of the great limitations in America’s ability to defend itself sensibly.

But as utopia – the peaceful world so longed for by our public culture and promised by President Clinton – beckons, up rears the ugly head of national rivalries.

The first presidential debate of 2004 took place strictly within the limitations of the public culture. There was little or no mention of security concerns involving Russia or China, and just a brief mention of in reference to North Korea. Neither candidate discussed where Iraq fits into the overall U.S. world situation, other than Senator John Kerry’s assertion that how we’ve dealt with Iraq has hurt our standing in the world. Instead, the candidates said the following:

Both endorsed preemption.

Both said what they thought what the biggest threat to the US: Kerry said nuclear proliferation, Bush said nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorists.

Each candidate declared that he has a grand vision. For Bush, it is the US championing democracy around the world, especially in the Middle East. For Kerry, it was the US avoiding conflict by acting in concert with other big powers.<sup>7</sup>

The discussion reflected the romanticism about the American position in the world that is embedded in our public culture. Bush stressed romantic crusaderism, championing democracy all over the world, whereas Kerry stressed an equally romantic notion of multilateralism. Neither dared suggest that any other nation, with the possible exception of the North Koreans and the Iranians, were acting in anything but good faith – the type of illusion we have labeled harmonism.

Indeed, by the closing weeks of the 2004 presidential campaign, most of the media was irresponsibly partisan, and everything published had a hidden (or not so hidden) agenda of support of for one candidate or the other. There was little real news – only stories colored to advance a candidate's chances. Nuances of terminology were always partisan. Anything that could be seized and used against a candidate was used, without regard to substantiation; and even, in some instances, in flagrant disregard of a lack of substantiation (e.g., Kerry's charge that Bush had failed in his duty to protect American servicemen when stockpiles of Iraqi high explosives were found to be missing from an Iraqi ammunition dump. It turned out that the munitions had been missing before American troops arrived at the dump in the early weeks of the war).

Presidents sometimes argue for anticipation as a better strategy than reaction or resilience (as did Franklin Roosevelt before World War II), but our nation has historically preferred reaction, despite its enormous cost, because we cannot ever assure ourselves that the danger we anticipated was real since the party out of office cannot resist the temptation to maintain that there was really no danger at all and so no need for action. The twin pillars of today's public culture – harmonism and convergence – reinforce the wishful thought that there is no danger that requires anticipation.

Political partisanship is driving accurate information out of the American system – either because the media are playing the political game themselves and doctoring their reporting to that purpose, or because the intensity of political controversy, involving leaks and demonization of opponents, causes people with information to keep silent. This is rather like how the threat of violence keeps people from informing on criminal activities.

During the antiterrorist campaign, there has been primarily partisan criticism – the content of which is always predictable because it is partisan, and unconvincing because it is predictable.

Our presidents are not fools. They know when they are pandering to the illusions of the public culture; they know that the realities of geopolitics are quite different. They sense the constraints placed on their actions and words by the public culture and reflexively try to loosen them. Their adversaries push in the opposite direction. The resulting tug of war sometimes leads to unpremeditated, gradual, and often unpredictable modifications in public culture.

Alexis de Tocqueville commented that in America some are raised to the common level in human knowledge that drives politics in America and some are lowered to it.<sup>8</sup> We call that common level public culture, and recognize that there is a difference between one who is raised to it versus one who is lowered to it. Those who are raised to the public culture do not fully understand it. They accept it and play by its rules. In contrast, those who lower themselves to it are choosing to play according to the rules of the public culture, though they see other alternative ways of being and thinking outside the public culture construct. Presidents sometimes fall in this category, as do many of their advisors.

There are consequences. As Americans latch on to a sanctioned belief system provided by our public culture they develop an unhealthy fear of honest brokers of information. “One of the worst by-products of our venomously partisan political culture is a growing distrust of anyone who claims to be nonpartisan. Red and blue combatants have systematically attacked the credibility of a wide variety of professionals whose jobs require objectivity: judges, pollsters, economists – and particularly journalists. Many of these same . . . crusaders . . . have simultaneously worked to undermine the very professional standards that all of these occupations have developed . . . to promote neutrality. . . . In the news business, things have gotten so bad that the term ‘mainstream media’ has actually become an epithet. . . . Problem is, imposing higher standards would drive up the cost of journalism while cutting its dramatic value. . . . The plain truth is that opinionated content . . . is often simpler, snappier, and less expensive to produce than objective content.”<sup>9</sup>

## THE MEDIA

In general, our media rely on and support the public culture. They draw their interpretation of events from it. Our politicians reference it in order to draw support for their positions. This is often done to the exclusion of truth telling.



Interestingly, the public culture is formed not by the reporting of events as much as by the meaning that an event is given. In this way it is much like the party line of a totalitarian state. We first noticed this surprising similarity several decades ago in the Soviet Union. Our Soviet hosts would listen surreptitiously at night to the English-language radio broadcasts of the Voice of America and the BBC in order to obtain information about developments in the world. (Incidentally, the Russian language broadcasts of the VOA and the BBC were jammed by the Soviets, so that only the intelligentsia who understood English, and were largely Communist Party members, were able to get their news via this illegal but tolerated means.) Then the next morning the intelligentsia would read Pravda – the journal of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – to find out the meaning given to events by the Party. Often Pravda, printed in Russian and available broadly, didn't report the news, but only the interpretation – relying on its more sophisticated readers to have received news via the English-language broadcasts.

So it was that our Soviet hosts and ourselves, Americans, had the same information as to world events, but gave them dramatically different interpretations.

It is by such a device in America that the public culture persists despite openness about reporting events. That is, a free press is not sufficient to a realistic interpretation of what is happening in the world.

In America events – the “news” – is reported reasonably accurately, often as well as reporters can do it, but then its meaning is often exaggerated or given a twist (when the White House does this, it is called “spin”). The meaning of the event or events is distorted to fit a particular political agenda. In this way, the media and politicians can claim accuracy as to reporting the news, yet be wildly inaccurate as to the significance of the event.

Newspapers direct the meaning of a news story by leaving to editorial directors the headlines on a story. Less commonly do they alter a story itself, and when that happens a reporter often objects that it is a violation of journalistic ethics. TV accomplishes the same objective by what context is given a story in a news broadcast, and by how much of the event is related. It is by such devices that the public culture is manipulated and reinforced continually.

Possibly in America the CIA is best at this game. It documents carefully. It composes a balanced assessment of outside “authoritative” opinion, but then falsifies one or two things. Almost no one catches on, except in extreme situations – as in the case of the weapons of mass destruction not found in Iraq, or

in the case of the underestimates in the Cold War of Soviet military capabilities and the overestimates, also in the Cold War, of Soviet economic growth.

### JOURNALISTS

News reporters are extremely important in our political life, and they are generally well intentioned in trying to do an honest and professional job. But there are fewer of them; they have less resources with which to work; they are employed for increasingly commercially oriented businesses that try to manipulate their reporting; they are subject to the direction of news directors who have motives that are primarily commercial (including the ratings competitions) rather than professional; and they are subjected to increasingly ham-handed interference in their work by courts – it's no wonder that they are increasingly forced to lean on the public culture for assistance in their work.

Journalists rely on our public culture because it provides a frame for the news and gives it meaning. “In order for an event to reach the public, it must first be viewed by reporters, then related in stories. . . . Journalists help mold public understanding and opinion by deciding what is important and what may be ignored, what is subject to debate and what is beyond question, and what is true and false . . .,” wrote Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean of the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School of Communication, in a study she coauthored. “The critical variable is usually not the facts themselves but the manner in which they are arranged and interpreted in order to construct narratives. . . . Because the terms we use to describe the world determine the ways we see it, those who control the language control the argument. . . . The language, stories and images . . . become filters through which we make sense of the political world, . . . alter the facts that are deemed important, [and] the ways in which fact is framed and frames come to be assumed . . .”<sup>10</sup>

It is the public culture that provides the framing for most news stories. The facts are framed by the public culture; when they are reported as news stories, the public culture is reinforced; and the frames (that is, the public culture itself) comes to be assumed.

Journalist is a broad term that includes news reporters, and investigative-enterprise reporters, pundits, and analysts. They provide basic information, deciding what is or is not newsworthy. The stories are based on a careful calculation of what fits into the prevailing public culture. “. . . Reporters determine whether a proposal is considered ‘reasonable’ in public debate in large part by whether it is embraced by elite figures,” Jamieson writes.

“Reporters have a bias toward the use of official sources, a bias toward information that can be obtained quickly, a bias toward conflict, a bias toward focusing on discrete events rather than persistent conditions, and a bias toward the simple over the complex . . .”<sup>11</sup>

Much of the public culture has its origins in experts of various sorts who tell us something we want to hear, harmonism or convergence. According to V. O. Key, journalists and the media largely transmit the ideas of others much as a trucking company carries books to a book store. The trucker is not responsible for the books content; nor the media for the ideas it transmits.<sup>12</sup> If this is true, we can dig further into what the experts do and what they read. “. . . If we are interested in the quality of information reaching the public, we must understand how it is manufactured, which is to say, we must understand the politics of expert communities as they relate to the generation and diffusion of knowledge claims, policy recommendations and general frames of reference.”<sup>13</sup>

This extensive effort, to understand the politics of expert communities, is beyond the scope of this book, but is admirably addressed in John R. Zaller’s, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*.

The public culture offers reporters an easily accessible frame for individual leaders and confining the leaders within it. In the context of public culture complex national figures become simple. For instance, the media has simplified and distorted the personality of President Bush, so that he is believed by many Americans, especially among the elite, to be a person of limited intelligence. And yet he is one of the two most educated of all our presidents (Andover, Yale, and Harvard, for Bush; Woodrow Wilson had a Ph.D. from John Hopkins), and managed to get himself elected president twice, when the candidates of those who despise his supposed ignorance failed.

The strength of a story frame with journalists is very great – it persists despite evidence to the contrary, or in ambiguous settings. For example, during the 2004 Presidential election Bush’s supposed limited intelligence was contrasted unfavorably with the supposedly superior intelligence of the Democratic candidate, John Kerry. When, in the spring of 2005, John Kerry’s grades at Yale (which both Kerry and Bush attended as undergraduates) were released to the media, and turned out to be very similar to Bush’s, the story could have been that Bush was smarter than had been realized, as smart as Kerry. Instead, the original frame of the story prevailed, and the reports were that Kerry had turned out to be as dumb as Bush.

Furthermore, the public culture seems determined to ignore that Bush has been elected to governorship of Texas, a state in which his credentials

of Ivy League education would ordinarily be fatal to a politician. The fact is that he is very smart – smart enough to avoid being labeled an elitist in Texas and smart enough to be twice elected president. But as we point out, he came to the presidency poorly informed about international affairs, as do most American presidents (though not all), and there is much to criticize in his policies. But to do so on the basis of his alleged lack of intelligence is to fall into the simplifying trap of public culture as transmitted to us through the media .

Reporters and political analysts operate in two parallel universes – the public culture and a better informed subculture. Reformers ask that news reporters and pundits aspire to be in the well-informed subculture – fitting “the story to the facts, not the facts to the story.”<sup>14</sup>

It would be nice if this were to happen; it is devoutly to be desired. But expecting it to happen is simply more wishful thinking, largely because of the influence of commercial media firms on what the news is.

#### COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISES

No serious reporter wants to be seen as a propagandist, or a shill. “One of the great attributes of journalists is their almost religious insistence on independence. . . . [But] a major factor determining what media content gets produced is the structure of economic and legal support for the media.”<sup>15</sup>

It was in the aftermath of World War II that media businesses began to restrict news operations. William R. Shirer noticed changes at CBS in the early 1950s, especially in connection with the national anticommunist hysteria. Businesses who advertised on CBS news wanted a say in the way the news was presented, and, more significantly, what content was acceptable. “Should a shaving cream company, or any other company that advertises on a network, determine whom the public should hear broadcasting news and comment, and by its selection make certain that the public will hear what the company wishes it to hear – most likely a narrow and conservative view of events? Or does the responsibility belong to the network?”<sup>16</sup> In *The Powers That Be*, David Halberstam reports that Murrow and Fred Friendly, Murrow’s producer at “See It Now” on CBS, were limited by certain advertisers in getting the message out quickly on the lies and deceptions of McCarthy in naming communists and other anti-Americans.<sup>17</sup>

Media businesses succeed financially largely as a result of advertising revenue, which is determined by the size of the audiences they attract. In the competition for audience, they hurry stories in order to be first to break them; they simplify content; and they attempt to fit audience predispositions. In

all this, they follow most of the time the public culture. Their job is not to educate; nor even to inform their audiences, but to attract audiences with popular programming. If information leads to that result, it may be pursued; if it doesn't, news programming becomes little more than magazine-like features, and newspaper stories become the sensationalism of the tabloids.

The self-interest of the media businesses, therefore, is closely tied to the continuance of public culture, for two reasons:

- Staying within the limits of public culture helps gather an audience, because people are comfortable with the frame of reference; and
- Conforming to the public culture saves the business money because it gives meaning to news reports without the business having to spend money to determine its actual meaning.

Thus, from both the revenue (or audience) side and from the expense side a profit-oriented media business has strong incentives to conform to and reinforce the public culture.

#### PRESIDENTS AND MEDIA

When President George W. Bush commented that he doesn't read the newspapers, he was condemned for it by some observers. They saw him as ignorant and dumb and evidencing both by ignoring the media. But a more charitable interpretation is that the president receives a lengthy briefing on the international situation each morning, so that he has his information from unusually reliable sources that are quite up-to-date, and what the media provides is so often wrong and dated that it provides not information but disinformation to him. So he ignores it. Also, he has political advisors who read the papers for political spin, so he need not spend his time doing that.

During an earlier but more difficult time in our nation's history President Lincoln walked each day from the White House to the telegraph office in the War Department where he waited by the hour for bulletins from the armies in the field, and looking at newspapers not for information but only to ascertain what the editors were thinking and what the public was being told, no matter how erroneous it was. In capsule, Lincoln read the papers to see what the editors knew; what they invented; and the spin they put on the two. The situation then, 150 years ago, was not much different for the president than now.<sup>18</sup>

The president's access to information and knowledge of events is very different from that of the public. This isn't a great thing for a democracy, but it's what we have. The president, if he wishes to master the illusion fostered by the media, must provide the public with a large and credible body of information. Rarely does an administration do so.

Public culture exerts a very strong influence on American politics. What we call public culture is akin to Stephen Skowronek's concept of a "regime," a particular public philosophy of the role of government at a given time.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Skowronek's regime is a significant part of our concept of the public culture. Skowronek sees presidential success in affiliating and expressing the particular regime of the times. His is a formal expression of the efforts of American presidential candidates (and most of our presidents remain candidates while in office) to follow – not lead – the public by discovering the public culture – convictions, prejudices, and misconceptions included – and identifying closely with them. It reminds one of the old irony: the best way to lead is to find a parade and get in front of it.

Although Skowronek seems to see the changing regimes as benevolent, and so seems to applaud politicians who successfully identify with them and thereby are elected to office, public culture (his "regime") has a darker side. Public culture invites Americans to lose focus; to shift agendas; and in so doing to overreach. It is, fact, a profound flaw in the Western intellect.

Because the public culture is at variance with reality, although it appears to presidents to be a refuge, it is in fact a trap. Its expectations cannot be fulfilled, so that disillusion and disappointment are inevitable for the electorate. When this happens, the protectors of the public culture, including the media, business interests and other politicians will turn on the president, and his popularity will collapse.

Despite the danger, or because they fail to perceive it, American presidents rarely challenge the popular culture no matter what the situation. Thus, President George W. Bush justified intervention in Iraq as necessary to eliminate weapons of mass destruction and to build democracy, being unwilling to discuss the issues of global politics that forced him to act. We will see in later pages that in this he was just like President John Kennedy, President Lyndon Johnson and others.

In searching for a safe political home in the public culture, the Bush Administration brought itself to a substantial overreach. The Administration began the war on terror with a broad, careful, long-term, strategic clarity that was expressed in the National Security Policy Statement of the United States

issued in September, 2002. But it saw a short-term political advantage, so it exaggerated the terrorist threat and its own response, won the congressional elections in the fall of 2002, then tripped into the pit of distorted expectations that it had itself dug.

For example, in Iraq we set out to do one thing and ended up doing another. Writing in November, 2003, Zell Miller, a Democratic Senator from Georgia, expressed his support for Republican candidate Bush in the conflict in Iraq. "This is our best chance," said Senator Miller, "to change the course of history in the Middle East."<sup>20</sup> How is the course of history to be changed? The idea is apparently that a democratic, free enterprise Iraq would be built to be a model for the rest of the region; so that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iran would follow by becoming more democratic and more like us economically. This is a remarkably ambitious agenda!

America started out to deny terrorism shelter in the region and to try to prevent our adversaries from obtaining weapons of mass destruction, and now we're engaged in trying to build a wholly different Middle East.

We overreached because our public culture required that our actions there to be legitimized in moral terms – not only as attacking terrorism, but as trying to build a world of democracy and free enterprise. So partisans on both side of the political aisles sought to twist the agenda into that framework. Yet, it's wishful thinking to believe that we can achieve the goal. After all, we've been preaching democracy since the American Revolution more than two hundred years ago, and its progress in the world is halting and imperfect – driven more by our victory in the three world wars (First, Second, and Cold) than by persuasion, and implemented in much of the world more in pretense than in reality (that is, many of what we today call democracies in the world are not that at all).

The Iraqi situation is a classic and serious example of the application of the public culture to our actions abroad, even when initiated in our defense. Thomas Friedman, classifying himself as a liberal and a leftist, argued for support from the left of President Bush's attempt to build democracy in Iraq in the following terms: ". . . here's why the left needs to get beyond its opposition to the war and start pitching in with its own ideas and moral support to try to make lemons into lemonade in Baghdad. First, even though the Bush team came to this theme late in the day, this war is the most important liberal, revolutionary U.S. democracy-building project since the Marshall Plan. The primary focus of U.S. forces in Iraq today is erecting a decent, legitimate, tolerant, pluralistic representative government from the ground up. I don't know if we can pull this off. We got off to an unnecessarily

bad start. But it is one of the noblest things this country has ever attempted abroad and it is a moral and strategic imperative that we give it our best shot.”

He then adds a single sentence that sums up the wishful thinking, “Unless we begin the long process of partnering with the Arab world to dig it out of the developmental hole it’s in, this angry, frustrated region is going to spew out threats to world peace forever.”<sup>21</sup>

Thus, Iraq has become a theater of overreach that threatens to stretch our resources too thin and undercut an effective response to the more significant challenges that are now and will be presented by Russia, China, and nuclear-armed rogue states. We got to this situation via the temptations of public culture. It is the combination of wishful thinking about cause and effect with the desire for a moral imperative to justify actions taken originally in self-defense that characterize the American public culture approach to defense issues today and tempts our president to commit us to extreme goals.

Yet Americans are outgrowing some of the extreme elements in our public culture. We are increasingly aware that it is all right to pursue national security without trying simultaneously to attain other major goals promoted by our public culture; and we are accepting that self-defense is itself a moral imperative. This is a crucial part of the new maturity of the American people, but is not enough appreciated by our political leaders.

#### CHAPTER 5: KEY POINTS

1. The wishful thinking of the American public projects good motives onto people who lack them, until events prove different. Often that is very late to begin to defend ourselves.
2. Wishful thinking is reinforced by elements of the media and our political activists who invent information or who place on events interpretations which mask their reality. We call these people mythomaniacs because they are addicted to fables for the purpose of personal advantage, commercial or political.
3. The desire for peace is not an element of myth in the public culture alone. Most of us hope for peace. Our criticism of public culture is because we fear it threatens peace with its illusions.
4. Americans need to look at U.S. politics with the harsh objectivity of American moderates – who view with concern extremist tendencies in both our major parties, and yet know they must choose between them at election time.



5. American presidents must deal with the public culture as a key element of the context in which they lead the nation. They must avoid being deceived by it (accepting it as true), and they must fashion explanations of their actions with it constantly in mind. There is a temptation to fashion explanations that are consistent with public culture, even though the explanations are false.